Castroism And Revolutionary Marxism (1981)

by George Breitman

Editor's Note: The following article by George Breitman was first published in the 1981 Socialist Workers Party pre-convention discussion bulletin under the title "Why the Political Resolution Should be Amended on the FI and Castroism". It is available in book format in the collection "In Defense of American Trotskyism" available fromthe Bulletin In Defense of Marxism. See the ad elsewhere in this issue.

George Breitman (1916-1986) here shown as a young candidate of the Socialist Workers Party for the U.S. Senate in 1942.

At the April NC plenum I voted in favor of the general line of the political resolution adopted there but against Sections 5 -11, on Cuba and the FI, which I criticized at the plenum. The edited draft of the resolution (in DB, Vol. 37, No. I, April 1981)was, in my opinion, an improvement over the craft presented to the plenum, but not enough to satisfy my objections. I also was dissatisfied with Comrade Barry Sheppard's plenum summary (DB, Vol. 37, No. 3, May 1981) although a large part of it was devoted to discussing or seeming to discuss questions and criticisms I raised in the discussion. So I have drafted amendments that I think should be made to the resolution before it is adopted by the national convention and will try to motivate them in what follows. [See amendments at the conclusion of this article.]

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1. The Fourth International

in order to clarify the SWP's attitude to the FI [Fourth International]. I think that is necessary not only because of what the resolution says and fails to say about the Fl but also because of the informal discussions that have been going on during the last year or two where leading members, even NC members, ask, "What did the FI ever accomplish?" You can't find this in writing, but its effects are real (and devastating) just the same.

As I told the NC plenum in April, I felt deeply concerned by signs since 1979 that the SWP leadership was pulling back from its previous wholehearted participation in the work of the FI. I recalled that a new note had been introduced at our January 1980 plenum by Comrade Peter Camejo, who used the differences over Nicaragua at the world congress to castigate the sectarians and dogmatists leading the Fl in Europe and to imply that we would be better off on our own, without them. I also recalled that Comrade Jack Barnes had told the January 1980 plenum that such remarks did not represent the thinking of the SWP leadership, which would present its views in the International's coming discussion and debate over Cuba and other disputed questions. I was reassured by that statement but now (April 1981), after reading the political resolution's approach to the FI, my apprehensions were aroused that the SWP leadership was moving in the direction of a pullback from the FI even though the long promised International discussion had not yet taken place.

I shall not dwell on Comrade Shepard's "reply" on this point in his summary, which ranged from irrelevancies (about Leonard Boudin, etc.) to surrealist delusions ("the whole idea that we may be politically withdrawing from the Fourth International implies that we are some foreign body in the International. No, politically we are the Fourth International; the Fourth International is us"). More significant was the fact that Comrade Shepard denied any pullback, and that the published draft of the resolution added a few phrases implying a greater identification of the SWP with the Fl than the earlier draft had done.

Nevertheless I think it is necessary to amend Section 10 in order to clarify the SWP's attitude to the FI. I think that is necessary not only because of what the resolution says and fails to say about the Fl but also because of the informal discussions that have been going on during the last year or two where leading members, even NC members, ask, "What

did the FI ever accomplish?" You can't find this in writing, but its effects are real (and devastating) just the same.

It reminds me of the Cochranites thirty years ago, except that their question was, "What did the SWP ever accomplish?" That was the form that liquidationism in our movement began with in the early 1950s. The Cochranites did not deny that the "old Trotskyism" had played an essential role in the past, with an excellent program, etc. But now, they said, it was necessary to move forward, applying the program in different places and in new ways.

At the April plenum I took exception to Comrade Shepard's remark in his report that we don't want to be in a world party of socialist resolutions, we want to be in a world party of socialist revolutions. This sentence was revised in the published version of the report, making it perhaps a little less offensive: "Our line and orientation, therefore, has got to be to realize that we are moving out of the period where we were restricted to being, by and large, the world party of socialist resolutions, to our objective, to help build the World Party of Socialist Revolution" (pp. 7- 8).

Less offensive, perhaps, but still disturbing, because if Comrade Shepard understood what he was saying he would have deleted the remark altogether. Because what it does, essentially, is to counterpose political analysis and theory (writing and debating resolutions) to building the international revolutionary party. That's a hell of a thing for leaders of the SWP or the FI to be teaching their members. Such stuff can only miseducate and disorient cadres and therefore can only obstruct the building of the party. Doesn't Comrade Shepard realize that the Third International, the model of the mass Leninist international we all advocate, was also restricted by and large to being a world party of socialist resolutions? It certainly never led any revolutions or had any affiliated parties that led successful revolutions in Lenin's time. Does he think that therefore we ought to make invidious comparisons between the Third International and the still-to-be-born Leninist international of the future?

The two amendments to Section 10 do not introduce any new concepts. They only repeat ideas and judgments we have expressed many times in the last half century. If there are comrades and tendencies in the party that no longer accept them, then let them say that clearly so that we can have a clear discussion before the convention and a clear decision on this point at the convention.

2. Cuba and Castroism

In his summary at the April plenum Comrade Shepard protested that the positions on Cuba in the political resolution "are not new." He cited a number of statements from the past—1963, 1967, etc.,—to "prove" that basically nothing new is being proposed today. But these citations are not used in such a way as to deepen our understanding; they serve to confuse us the way sleight of hand confuses us. The truth is that however superficially similar to current positions such citations may seem, their meaning and function were different in 1963 and 1967 than today. In no case did anyone who said or wrote those statements at that time use those statements or want them to be used to justify minimizing or ignoring the real differences between us and the Castro tendency or fuming our backs on the FI.

Is the majority position basically new (that is, different from our past position in any fundamental ways)? The only possible answer is yes. You cannot come to any other conclusion if you compare the positions adopted almost unanimously at our 1979 convention with the positions being advocated now. Comrade Steven Ashby's article "Castroism: Revolutionists of Action" (in DB, Vol. 37, No. 5, May 1981) presents some of the evidence about the magnitude and scope of the changes being proposed, and it doesn't exhaust all the evidence either. If there are any comrades who have doubts on this score, I urge them to read or reread the Education for Socialists bulletin *Revolutionary Cuba Today*, published in 1980 and containing some of the documents adopted or presented in 1978 and 1979. The majority supporters feel embarrassed about these 1979 documents now because they were written in a critical spirit, that is, in our traditional way of analyzing political tendencies, including those that come closest to us.

"Revolutionary defense of Cuba requires an unceasing struggle to reform the workers' state with bureaucratic deformations such as the Left Opposition conducted in Russia from 1923 to 1933. This means fighting for a workers' council or soviet-type system, which does not exist in any form in Cuba today, through which the workers could rule politically. And not only must we be for reform of the Cuban workers' state but we must not be bashful about saying so openly and whenever appropriate."

Revolutionary Marxists?

Another obstacle to clarity in the present discussion is the majority's shifting use of terminology. "Revolutionary Marxist" is an outstanding example. Two years ago, our discussions of Cuba included a debate over whether to call Castroism "revolutionary" or "centrist." The convention decided that while "revolutionary" might not be the perfect term it was more fitting than any other proposed. But as used in this context "revolutionary" did not imply that Castroism was "revolutionary Marxist"—in fact, the advocates of "revolutionary" explicitly stated that Castroism was not revolutionary Marxist.

A year later the leaders of the majority changed their minds and began, in speeches at the 1980 educational con-

ference and in articles in the press, to publicly designate Castroism as revolutionary Marxist. After a few months this was discontinued. When the first draft of the political resolution was distributed for our April plenum I read it carefully and noted that it did not designate Castroism as revolutionary Marxist. (Comrade Ashby is wrong when he says that it does.) I told the NC I was glad that "revolutionary Marxist" had been dropped as an appellation of Castroism, but pointed out that other terms used in the resolution could be interpreted as possible equivalent-substitutes for "revolutionary Marxist," and urged that if the authors *meant* to say or imply "revolutionary Marxist," it would be better to use this term openly in the resolution so that we could discuss it properly. A couple of comrades at the plenum stated during the discussion that they think the Castroists are revolutionary Marxists, but they did not explain why the resolution did not say so, or why they did not offer an amendment to put this in the resolution. In his summary Comrade Shepard did not mention the point at all.

When the edited resolution was published after the plenum, a couple of the possible equivalent-substitute terms had been omitted while others were retained (revolutionary proletarian leadership, revolutionary internationalists). But the resolution itself does not call the Castroists revolutionary Marxists. I thought at least that was clear until last week when the preconvention discussion on Cuba was opened in the New York City branches and supporters of the majority position took the floor to argue that Castroism is revolutionary Marxism, and that we had all been sectarian for not having realized that before. How can we have a responsible discussion on the basis of hide-and-seek games?

"The Cuban CP is not and never has been a Leninist party, even though it has revolutionary forces in its leadership and membership...as a fusion of the Castroist, Stalinist, and other elements...it is patterned after the bureaucratic party structures in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union... It includes at least two tendencies—the Castroist, which exercises hegemony, and the Stalinist—whose differences are never openly discussed before the membership."

Over Adapting to Castroism

At the April plenum I gave my interpretation of what has been happening and how that has led to the present differences. My interpretation does not involve any accusations of capitulation to Castroism. I don't know of any Castroists in the SWP and I don't know anyone in it who is advocating Castroism. But I do think there is a tendency in the SWP, developing since the last convention, which is over adapting to Castroism. There is an important distinction between "over adapting" and "capitulating," just as there is between "adapting" and "over adapting." In my opinion there is nothing wrong in "adapting" to a group or tendency that we think is promising and want to influence. We do that all the time—in unions, Black and women's groups, community organizations. We try to speak their language, to understand their particular needs and history, to avoid or reduce unnecessary or unimportant points of contention, to find common ground to talk, work, and fight on. We even had to do that when we joined the Socialist Party to win over its left wing in 1936. So I've never seen anything reprehensible in "adapting" to Castroism or any other tendency we've decided to make special efforts to influence. And I was in favor of doing that as early as anyone in this party. I can only say good luck to comrades seeking to win Castroists to our politics when they present our ideas to them through quotations from Marx rather than through quotations from Trotsky (whom the Castroists have been conditioned to dislike and reject).

But most good things, when carried too far, become bad things. That is what has been happening as "adaptation" has been transformed into over adaptation: when we begin to forget basic criticisms, blur differences, try to throw the best possible light on positions that are indefensible, educate new members so that they can't perceive differences between our tendency and Castro's, or express our criticisms in tones so muted that hardly anyone can notice them.

The cause of this transformation is that the SWP leaders, after undertaking the kind of "adaptation" discussed above, found that it was not having much effect. The differences between us and Castroism are not fewer or smaller than they were in the past or than they were two years ago when our convention adopted the positions we have had since then. I do not say that the differences between us and Castroism are bigger than they were in 1979—on balance I think they are about the same. Instead of recognizing the lesson of this experience, which is the limits of "adaptation," the SWP leaders began to look at Castroism in a different light. This led them to the conclusion that the differences between it and us are not and usually have not been crucial, and often were the result not of the shortcomings of Castroism but of our own shortcomings, and especially of our alleged proclivity to sectarianism, about which there have been quite a lot of unfounded and light minded assertions inside the party in recent years.

Comrade Sheppard's summary at the plenum misrepresented my point about the dangers of overadaptation. The charge would be valid, he said, only "if we began adopting wrong political positions because they were the positions of the Cubans," and we haven't done that, on Poland or any other issue. But taking wrong positions because the Cubans had done so would not be over adaptation, it would be something else—capitulation. That's different and more serious, and not a charge I had made. So why does he distort the problem I did raise? Merely because it's easier to answer

his own invention than to answer questions that trouble a great many comrades?

Castroism and the Political Revolution

Poland is actually a good example of how the majority over adapts to Castroism, not because it adopts the Castro tendency's terrible position on Poland but because its efforts to explain the Castroist position have produced a wrong focus and a wrong emphasis on the political revolution taking place in Poland. The facts are quite clear. Castro and the Cuban CP oppose the Polish revolution and defend the forces of counterrevolution that want to contain the revolution before it extends to other workers' stases or to crush it if it can't be contained and curbed. Such a position can only be characterized as counterrevolutionary, I said at the plenum. And it is not an isolated thing, because the Castroists supported the counterrevolutionary invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 in precisely the same way, although their rhetoric was more radical then, and because the logic of their position on Poland will lead to support of similar counterrevolutionary intervention in other workers' states. A strange position for revolutionary proletarians, proletarian internationalists, or revolutionary Marxists!

"It is too simplistic," Comrade Shepard rejoined, "to say that the Cuban leadership has a counterrevolutionary position on Poland, and that's that." (Who said "and that's that"?) "That is not accurate. The resolution is more accurate; it describes in a more complete way the Cuban leadership's position on Poland and other workers' states, and the evolution of its stance." But if the resolution is more accurate and more complete, why does it lack a direct statement of what the Castroist position favors—military action by the Warsaw Pact powers to put down the Polish revolution? Why can't the authors of the more accurate and more complete resolution bring themselves to mention that fact, among other things, instead of confining themselves to euphemisms about cutting across class solidarity, miseducating people who look to the Cubans for leadership, etc.?

One result of over adaptation is a growing inability of the majority leaders to read and hear things correctly if they pertain to Castroism and run counter to wishful thinking on that subject. The Australian comrades have documented a bad case of our leadership's misreading of the Cuban position on the Kremlin's intervention in Afghanistan ("Afghanistan—Where the New Line of the American Socialist Workers Party Goes Wrong," by the Political Committee of the Australian SWP). Comrade J.P. Beauvais has written a long criticism of Comrade Fred Feldman's long *IP [Intercontinental Press]* article about the Cuban CP's second congress, showing that Comrade Feldman quotes and paraphrases from Cuban texts in an unacceptable way ("Cuban Society in the Light of the Second Congress of the CCP," in *Inprecor,* No. 98, March 30, 1981; an English translation will no doubt be published eventually). Comrades ought to read these things as part of the present pre-convention discussion..

"Our political approach to the Castro tendency should be—continuation of united front collaboration wherever possible and of our efforts to win the revolutionary supporters of Castroism to the Fourth International and its work to construct a mass Leninist international."

I can offer my own example of the failure of some comrades to hear things about Cuba right. In Comrade Sheppard's summary at the plenum there is a relatively long section under the title "Has There Been a Degeneration?" This is the section that Comrade Roland Sheppard objects to as a distortion of Comrade Nat Weinstein's position on Cuba (DB, Vol. 37, No. 8, June 1981).

Actually it was aimed at me, not at Comrade Weinstein, although that is not obvious to the reader since I am unnamed in the summary. It was aimed at me despite the fact that I had said nothing about a degeneration in Cuba and don't believe there has been one.

What I did say at the plenum was: "Revolutionary defense of Cuba requires an unceasing struggle to reform the workers' state with bureaucratic deformations such as the Left Opposition conducted in Russia from 1923 to 1933. This means fighting for a workers' council or soviet-type system, which does not exist in any form in Cuba today, through which the workers could rule politically. And not only must we be for reform of the Cuban workers' state but we must not be bashful about saying so openly and whenever appropriate."

A Struggle to Reform the Bureaucratic Deformations Within the Cuban Workers' State

A struggle to reform the workers' state with bureaucratic deformations. That was the principled position of Lenin and Trotsky in Russia before Stalinism came to power, and it was the principled position of the Left Opposition thereafter and until 1933 (when our movement stopped trying to reform the Soviet state). This should also be our principled position on the Cuban workers' state. That is what I said, without any reference to the tactics that have to be pursued, which obviously are different in Cuba today from those required in the USSR in the 1920s. Comrade Shepard is so hypnotized by tactical questions (without knowing quite what to do about them) that he cannot recognize a principled position when one is raised in his presence and he disposes of it in effect by attributing to me the view that "we should politically approach the Cuban leadership like the Left Opposition approached the Stalinists in the period from 1923 to 1933." But I wasn't discussing how to politically approach the Cuban leadership, which is a secondary question, subordinate to our principled and strategic positions. Muddling the two levels will only undermine our basic concepts without contributing anything worthwhile to a correct political approach to Castroism.

Outline of the Proposed Amendments

My amendments on Cuba and Castroism would delete all of Sections 5-9 in the political resolution. I agree with many of the statements in those sections but it would be hard to amend it sentence by sentence without becoming cumbersome. So I think it's better to delete Sections 5 -9 for the sake of clarity and leave it to an editing committee to restore things we all agree on in the final version to be printed after the convention.

The first paragraph of the amendments on Cuba presents our principled position on reform and our bedrock objectives on the road of reform, which we will work and fight for no matter what other tendencies do.

"We advocate and support reform of the Cuban workers' state as part of our unconditional defense of this state against all its enemies. Among the principal reforms we work for are the introduction of workers' councils (soviets), which the workers need in order/to rule politically and to advance the transition to socialism, and recognition of the right to form oppositional tendencies, factions, or parties, which is denied today by law and in practice."

The second paragraph lists major positive (revolutionary) and negative (nonrevolutionary) features of Castroism, which is a highly contradictory tendency.

The third paragraph points to the non-Leninist character of the Cuban CP and to the conflicting tendencies joined together in that party under the leadership of Castro.

The fourth paragraph indicates what our political approach to the Castro tendency should be—continuation of united front collaboration wherever possible and of our efforts to win the revolutionary supporters of Castroism to the Fourth International and its work to construct a mass Leninist international.

3. Where and How to Work

The main purpose of the amendments to Section 11 is to delete the prescription that if we work in the Cuban CP, FSLN, and New Jewel Movement it must be only as "loyal builders." It would be better to discuss these three organizations separately since they are quite different structurally and historically. The Cuban CP is patterned on the Stalinist party structures in the USSR and Eastern Europe and it is the only legal party in Cuba, thanks to an undemocratic constitution. The main reason that people holding our ideas probably should work inside the Cuban CP is that no other party is permitted in Cuba. *How* we work there will have to depend on the evolution of that party and its response to the wishes, needs, and democratic rights of its members to express opinions, form tendencies, etc. The FSLN and New Jewel Movement seem to be more democratic than the Cuban CP, in which case the possibility of functioning in them as loyal builders is greater; but even there I think it better not to make abstract recommendations on matters that have to be decided and changed in accord with changing concrete circumstances.

Similarly, it seems advisable to delete the categorization of these three organizations as our "fellow revolutionary parties." When we used this term in the past, it referred to other parties and sympathizing sections of the FI. Now the resolution confers that label on three non-FI parties but does not use it for the FI parties and sympathizing sections. Whatever that signifies, the categorization should be at least postponed until it is thought through and better motivated.

At the end of the preconvention discussion in the branches I would like to have the members vote on the general line of my amendments.

Amendments to the Political Resolution

Amendments to Section 10 ("The Fourth International')

Paragraph 3, after the sentence "The Fourth International is a Marxist nucleus, organized as a world party, with the conscious aim of rebuilding such a mass proletarian international," add the following sentences:

"It is the only tendency in the world today that has this aim, which it has been advancing since its inception. Politically and organizationally, it is and has been the principal continuator and defender of the theories and practices of Leninist internationalism since the degeneration of the Third International"

Paragraph 9, after the sentence "The rise of world revolution creates greater opportunities than ever before for the Fourth International to grow, increase our political influence in the mass workers movement, and become proletarian in composition as well as program," insert to the third sentence the words "the Fourth International w~measure up to these responsibilities and that" so that the third sentence will read as follows:

"We are confident that the Fourth International will measure up to these responsibilities and that the revolutionists of action who emerge out of all three sectors of the international class struggle will increasingly identify with the necessary line of march of the working class."

Amendments to Sections 5-9 ("The Revolutionary Course of the Cuban Leadership,')

Delete all of Sections 5-9 and substitute the following:

Cuba is a workers' state, which we have always defended against imperialist attack and capitalist counterrevolution. It is not a deformed workers' state (the name given by our movement to workers' states that require political revolution to rid -them of Stalinist domination). It is a workers' state

with bureaucratic deformations (the name Lenin used to describe the Soviet Union in 1920, the name applied to Cuba by the SWP at its 1979 convention). We advocate and support reform of the Cuban workers' state as part of our unconditional defense of this state against all its enemies. Among the principal reforms we work for are the introduction of workers' councils (soviets), which the workers need in order to rule politically and to advance the transition to socialism, and recognition of the right to form oppositional tendencies, factions, or parties, which is denied today by law and in practice.

Castroism (the Castro tendency) evolved through combat from a petty-bourgeois grouping into the leadership of the Cuban social revolution, which it led to the victorious establishment of a workers' state and which, under the banner of Marxism and internationalism, it continues to lead in struggle against imperialist violence, pressures, and blockade. To its credit are many revolutionary accomplishments at home (nationalization of industry and planned economy, agrarian reform, free education, socialized medicine, uprooting racism, challenging sexism, etc.) and abroad (active solidarity and sacrifice to aid revolutionary struggles in other countries and to extend their own revolution), which have earned it the respect of revolutionaries everywhere and have given it the possibility of making major contributions to the solution of the leadership crisis that plagues the working class internationally. At the same time Castroism always has taken a number of non-Marxist and nonrevolutionary positions (maintenance of the political monopoly the top Castro leadership has exercised since the start of the Cuban workers' state, rejection of Leninist norms of party building at both national and international levels, political support of "friendly" bourgeois regimes, etc.) and has acquired other nonrevolutionary positions since its inception (opposition to political revolution in the USSR and Eastern Europe, acceptance of Stalinist ideology in the education of Cuban youth, etc.).

The Cuban CP is not and never has been a Leninist party, even though it has revolutionary forces in its leadership and membership. It did not lead the Cuban revolution, being organized six years after that event as a fusion of the Castroist, Stalinist, and other elements. It is patterned after the bureaucratic party structures in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union whose principal function is to keep the ruling stratum in power. It is the only legal party in Cuba today. It includes at least two tendencies—the Castroist, which exercises hegemony, and the Stalinist—whose differences are never openly discussed before the membership. The education of the members is much more influenced by Stalinist ideology than it was in the first years after the revolution. The Cuban CP as a whole should not be confused with its different wings, left or right.

"Despite our serious differences with the Castro tendency, we recognize it to be close to ours and have always sought to collaborate with it for common revolutionary objectives. The chief obstacles have been our political differences. To overcome these, there are no substitutes for united front activities and patient political discussion to win the Castroists to Fourth Internationalist perspectives, even in countries where we may find ourselves in the same party with them."

Despite our serious differences with the Castro tendency, we recognize it to be close to ours and have always sought to collaborate with it for common revolutionary objectives. The chief obstacles have been our political differences. To overcome these, there are no substitutes for united front activities and patient political discussion to win the Castroists to Fourth Internationalist perspectives, even in countries where we may find ourselves in the same party with them.

Amendments to Section 11 ("Toward a Mass Leninst International")

Paragraph 5, change the first sentence "In Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada, the place for those who share our ideas is as loyal builders of the Cuban Communist Party, FSLN, and New Jewel Movement" so that it will read as follows:

"In Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada, the place for those who share our ideas about Leninist internationalism is in the Cuban Communist Party, FSLN, and New Jewel Movement."

Paragraph 5, change the second sentence "These parties, which we consider to be fellow revolutionary parties, have shown in action that they are the leaders of the working people of their countries" so that it of the read as follows:

"These parties, which have the potential to become revolutionary parties in a Leninist sense, have shown in action that they are the leaders of the working people of their countries."

(June 18, 1981)